

Process Not Program:

**Adult Faith Formation
for Vital Congregations**

by
Diana Butler Bass

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About this Guide

Welcome! Whether you are an ordained or lay minister, and an individual or a team, you will find this guide particularly valuable if:

- You are responsible for adult faith formation in your congregation;
- You are committed to nurturing and developing spiritual growth, theological reflection, and Christian practices;
- You are seeking, not a packaged set of programs, but a way to help your congregation engage in the process of becoming more fully aware of its unique identity and God's call (hence the title, *Process, Not Program*).

Notice that we have referred to "**adult faith formation**," not "adult education." Why is that? Author Diana Butler Bass notes, "too often the word, *education*, carries the connotation of information or expertise. Adult formation does educate, but it also engages the whole person—intellect, passions, and spirit—in a process and practice of Christian maturity."

Please take a few moments to learn about our author and sponsor. Then join Diana Butler Bass as she explores this vital area of congregational life.



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| About this Guide | 2 |
| About the Author/Sponsor | 4 |
| Challenge of Faith Formation | 5 |
| A Growing Trend | 5 |
| Learning Communities | 6 |
| You are the Leading Learner | 7 |
| Informed Insider | 7 |
| Called Newcomer | 8 |
| Your Own Spiritual Formation | 8 |
| Mission Statement..... | 10 |
| Christian Formation | 10 |
| Adult Formation | 11 |
| Four Components | 12 |
| First Component: Structure | 12 |
| Times | 12 |
| Styles..... | 13 |
| Communicating the Template | 15 |
| Second Component: Process/Practice | 15 |
| New Language..... | 16 |
| New Community | 17 |
| Mission/Vision..... | 18 |
| Communication..... | 19 |
| Goals/Pilgrimage..... | 20 |
| Support | 20 |
| Welcoming Conflict..... | 21 |
| Third Component: Content | 22 |
| Congregation/Content | 23 |
| Content Template | 24 |
| Themes/Seasons..... | 25 |
| Communicate Content | 25 |
| Fourth Component: Community | 26 |
| Setting the Table | 26 |
| Hospitality..... | 27 |
| Existing Relationships..... | 28 |
| Groups | 28 |
| Holy Reading..... | 29 |
| Virtual Formation | 30 |
| Networks | 31 |
| A Personal Perspective..... | 32 |

About the Author



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Christianity for the Rest of Us was cited as a top religion "book of the year" by *Publishers Weekly* and *Christian Century*. It won the Book of the Year Award from the Academy of Parish Clergy.

For a decade, Diana taught undergraduate religious studies; from 1995-2000, she was a weekly columnist for the *New York Times* syndicate. As an active Episcopal lay person, she has served on adult education teams at several congregations. For almost two years, she was the Director of Faith Formation at Christ Church (Episcopal) in Alexandria, Virginia.

From 2002 to 2006, she was Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice (a Lilly Endowment funded project), a study of mainline Protestant vitality.

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To learn more about Diana and her work, check out on the article about her in Wikipedia. And don't miss Diana's website, www.dianabutlerbass.com.

About the Sponsor

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Challenge of Faith Formation

A few years ago, I attended a rapidly growing congregation in California. Most of the newcomers fit one of two categories. They were either returning baby-boomers or spiritual seekers. Most returnees had grown up in a mainline tradition but quit church in their teens or early twenties. They had lots of emotional and spiritual baggage regarding the Bible, theology, and Christian tradition. Many of the seekers, often GenXers, had rarely been inside a church. One of those newcomers, a young man in graduate school, excitedly told my husband of hearing the Bible read from the pulpit for the first time: "But I don't know the stories the readings are part of." My husband quickly ran off to the local bookstore and got him a copy of Walter Wangerin's *The Book of God* to fill in the story gaps.

Those of us in congregational leadership quickly realized that we had a set of problems. How to honor the life experience and practical wisdom of the returnees while helping them to theological maturity? And how, at the same time, to introduce unchurched people to the fullness of life in God, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and the traditions of Christian community?

Our problem was not evangelism. People were coming to the church. Our problem was adult education.

And, still worse news: **no single curriculum or program** could help us. We needed to fashion an introduction to church that worked in our setting. Adult formation would be a **process, not a program**. We needed to understand our own identity and communicate our vision of faith and vocation to the new members.

The congregation became more fully itself, more aware of God's call, in the process of thinking through and experimenting with adult formation. That awareness—of congregational identity and the practices that bound us together—translated into even more people coming into the church and an ever-being-revised cycle of evangelism, incorporation, formation, and practice. Creative processes are being re-worked and re-created as the church grows and changes.

A Growing Trend

What once seemed like a unique problem in a singular congregation is becoming more common in growing mainline congregations. In the large, historic Virginia church where I served as Director of Faith Formation, our newcomer classes—with as many as 40 or 50 members—comprised a similar mix of returnees and seekers. Many did not speak a Christian "language" or engage in faith practices that shaped their lives and families.

Christian illiteracy in a post-Christian society is a daily reality. As leaders, we are learning to assume no theological knowledge or Christian practice. And even many of our long-term church members are seeking to go deeper, find connections in life and faith, explore vocational and career concerns, and ask hard questions about the Bible, ethics, and world religions.

Ministers, Christian education directors, church musicians, and theologically trained lay leaders are now missionaries, biblical scholars, theologians, spiritual directors, mentors, and seminary professors in order to effectively be the church and do God's

work in the world.

If the task is difficult in a large congregation with many resources, it is doubly hard on colleagues who serve in smaller churches—where adult formation is key to attracting and retaining new members while serving the spiritual needs of current congregants. In small churches, a minister typically handles adult education amid the everyday duties of marrying, burying, and pastoring. With clergy shortages now reported in many denominations, the traditional paradigm of minister-as-theological teacher is likely to recede even further into memory.

Learning Communities

How can the contemporary hunger for solid Christian formation be met? Only in congregations where churchgoers think of themselves as **learners** and **practitioners**. Newcomers are learning about faith, growing into congregants, and putting faith in to practice. And those who have been around for a while are learning how to teach, support, and "equip the saints." No one person can manage this huge educational task alone. Instead, there must be a reorientation that recognizes the congregation as "a **learning community**" of faith. **All** need to be mentors and learners to each other.

As the Director of Faith Formation, I provided guidance, vision, and resources to help the congregation live into these changes—and help them learn how to teach and learn together, how to deepen and pass on their faith. Creating a learning community of faith is not just for big churches with a director, money, and program. Learning communities can be large or small, with many resources or few. Small ones, whose greatest asset is personal relationships, actually may be more effective than large churches in creating learning communities.

For several decades, thoughtful Christian educators have understood the changes that are upon us and have urged congregations to think theologically about creating Christian community and shaping Christian lives. Many now speak of "catechesis," "formation," "discipleship," "mentoring," and "practice" in place of "education." These are **process-oriented** words, terms that convey the idea of learning as a **journey** or **pilgrimage**.

Too often the word, "education," carries the connotation of information or expertise. Adult formation does educate, but it also engages the **whole person**—intellect, passions, and spirit—in a process and practice of Christian maturity. It seeks to form or shape a meaningful way of being Christian and putting Christian faith into practice in the world.

You are the Leading Learner

As the person with responsibility for adult formation, you are the "**leading learner**" and **model practitioner** in your congregation. Too often, a congregational educator has been expected to serve as the person with all the answers. But a mentor of a mentoring community should lead by **example** as well as expertise.

After your theological, biblical, and spiritual formation (through formal or informal training), your first on-the-job learning task as adult formation director should be to **learn about your congregation**. Being able to read your congregation's needs, problems, strengths, and languages enables you to develop processes that nurture a learning community.



Informed Insider

How and what you learn will be shaped by your relationship to the community. Many men and women serving as educators grew up **within** the congregation itself—they are "**informed insiders**." If this applies to you:

- You will know a great deal about the **congregation**, its **history**, its **strengths** and **weaknesses**, and its current **needs**.
- You will know how to accomplish **tasks**, arrange **events**, and deal with congregational **structure**.
- You already possess a kind of **local wisdom** that it may take a hired professional staff person years to gain.

Yet you will be learning about the congregation. The views from the pews and from the clergy's office are not identical:

- You will be learning about institutional **business**, **budgets**, power **struggles**, and **conflict**.
- Fellow parishioners will treat you **differently**, often expecting you to provide pastoral care.
- There will be many Sundays when you are **working** and not worshipping.
- You will be learning the **difference** between being a fellow or sister church member and being a minister (ordained or not) in a congregation.

- You will need to be more **critical** (as in "able to critique") about your community and where it may need to change.
- You will need **resources, friends, co-workers**, and a **colleague group** to help you navigate the transition. Some of these supports are more readily available to ordained persons than to lay educators—often the lay professional becomes isolated in the process of learning how to do congregational ministry. "Informed insiders" can have a difficult time seeing the "underbelly" of church life and may become disillusioned.

Called Newcomer

The "**called newcomer**," an educator brought into a congregation from the **outside**, has some advantages in learning about a faith community:

- No one expects you to immediately understand the congregation. You start at the **beginning**—by learning names, hearing people's stories, reading congregational histories, and learning about the congregation from key leaders. A healthy congregation will allow time for this and recognize that you are a newcomer.
- You **know you need to learn** and have no illusions about how well you understand the congregation.
- You probably have some **previous ministry experience** and are not surprised by the challenges of serving in a church. You are a bit more savvy—and no longer romanticize ministry.

Yet you, like the "informed insider," will be learning about the congregation:

- You need to learn all the **mechanical issues**—budget, scheduling, publicity, and leadership responsibilities.
- You will be learning **local congregational culture** and the relationship between you, your vision, your calling, and your particular community. For the "called newcomer," this process can be highly creative and full of personal and spiritual insights about God and ministry.
- Frustrations may arise if miscommunication occurs, if an unhealthy individual or system purposefully provides false information, or if either you or the community discern that the two parties do not "mesh" in ministry.

Your Own Spiritual Formation

"Informed insiders" and "called newcomers" may be either ordained or lay persons. **All** congregational educators should take their own spiritual formation seriously; it is the wellspring of service and ministry. is especially important in the role of an Adult Formation Director. As one who helps to shape others, you must **model** a formed adult faith.

Spiritual formation for congregational leadership includes:

- personal **prayer**, spiritual **guidance**, **quiet** time, **retreat**, and **study**;
- **biblical** and **theological** education, whether formal or informal;

- a working knowledge of **congregational development**, **adult education**, and **stages of faith development** through reading, workshops, or continuing education; and
- **collegial friendships** with others in ministry.

As an adult educator, you are a life-long **learner**, a **teacher**, and a **disciple**. You are a leader who is also on a journey, one who ministers in a community. Few positions call for as much vision, creativity, flexibility, re-flexibility, energy, organizational savvy, pastoral skills, and personal warmth as does this one.



Mission Statement

The mission statement is a good place to start learning about the congregation and helping them to become a learning community. In recent decades, many churches have adopted mission statements and posted them on bulletins and websites. Not ends in themselves, mission statements serve as platforms of common vision, cornerstones of congregational identity and purpose. They remind congregations of their **identity**, **priorities**, and **vocation**.

If there is a mission statement, study it. How does adult formation fit into this congregation's sense of identity and mission? Is adult spiritual formation implicit or explicit in the community's self-understanding? What might the congregation need to carry out its mission?

If the congregation does not have a mission statement, ask them to consider writing one. In that process, ask how they understand adult formation and its role—and ask them to make it an **explicit** part of the mission statement.



Christian Formation

If the congregation does have a statement, consider writing a **specific** mission statement for Christian formation that supports the church's overall mission. The congregation where I served has a very long, detailed mission and vision statement. One of its points, "We offer faith formation for all ages," speaks directly to the congregational priority for Christian education.

In addition, Faith Formation has furthered developed its own mission statement:

Adult Formation at Christ Church is committed to spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals and the congregation by providing community, education, and resources that empower the parish to grow in faith, deepen in theological and biblical reflection, and understand our lives as the priesthood of God's faithful people in and to the world.

This statement **reflects the vision** of the congregational statement and makes **specific priorities for Faith Formation** clear. It guided me in the choices I made about classes, program, and events. And it helps outside visitors—teachers, speakers, and workshop leaders—to focus their presentations in ways consistent with the overall program and vision.



Adult Formation

In writing an Adult Formation mission statement, the director should write one for him- or herself. Even if your mission statement is private, it helps to clarify the role of education/formation in relation to the congregational sense of mission. If you work with a committee, have them write such statements. Share yours with them. Discuss and compare them—and see if your group can come to an agreed-upon statement. Post it in your adult education flyers, church newsletter, and website.



Get the congregation talking about the role adult formation plays in their lives and the life of the congregation. Depending on your congregation's structure, you may need to have it approved by a board or vestry to have it formalized or publicly posted. Or, if it works better in your situation, you may want to keep the mission statement as an informal guide for you, your committee, and teachers.

Remember that mission statements are **guides to where you believe God is calling you**. As the sense of mission changes or deepens, the mission statement may change as well. The best mission statements are **organic**; they are constantly re-interpreted and sometimes re-written, as your community hears and responds to God's dynamic presence.

Four Components

To the casual observer or to parishioners, it may appear that Adult Education is primarily a matter of content—lining up teachers, developing a program, leading a Bible study, or purchasing or writing curriculum.

But organizing and presenting **content is only one aspect** of adult formation. In addition to content, three other components are key in developing learning communities that are responsive to local need and mission—**structure, process, and community**.

Often overlooked, these three elements of adult formation play an important role in congregational development and transformation. When unattended, issues of structure, process, and community may undermine an otherwise fine education program.



First Component: Structure

Rethinking the structure of adult formation and education may be the most helpful thing you ever do for your congregation. By creating templates of **times, styles,** and **communication** for formation, you leave a lasting structure for others who may follow in your footsteps. New leaders need not re-invent the wheel of formation with personnel changes.

Times

Finding the right times for adult formation may be simple—or extremely difficult. While worship and education frequently happen on Sunday morning, some congregations may have informal practices that **inhibit** quality formation on that day. A choir may practice during the Adult education hour, an outdoor coffee hour in spring or summer may keep people from class, or a congregation with long sermons or announcements may gnaw away at educational time. It is frustrating and embarrassing to host a guest speaker who has only twenty minutes to teach because the service runs over. Help the congregation understand that Sunday morning worship includes **sanctuary** and **formation**—and create a congregational culture of thoughtful scheduling and attendance.

Due to busy-ness or time constraints, Sunday morning may be the **least** effective formation time on the church's schedule. I now consider Sunday morning classes 40-minute "**entry points**" for evangelism and discipleship. Deeper formation occurs at alternate times—mid-week nights, morning groups, or special weekend events. Although fewer people typically attend those times, those who do are more highly committed and willing to explore faith more deeply. **Putting regular, alternative formation times on the church's weekly calendar is key to maturing the congregation.** Eventually, people who attend non-Sunday educational events will become themselves teachers, elders or board members, and ministry leaders—in these smaller gatherings, you are truly "equipping the saints" for ministry.

Questions to consider:

- When do people expect to come and learn?
- When might they be willing to come?
- What factors (difficult rush hours, working mothers, no child care) limit participation?
- How might those factors be overcome?



Styles

Many churches offer a Sunday morning "Adult Forum," a large class with a speaker who addresses an issue or community concern—sometimes theological, but often-times a public concern (like housing or racism) that may not have any direct spiritual or theological instruction. While the Adult Forum may be a venerated style of many mainline congregations, it developed in the 1940s and 1950s—when clergy could assume a greater level of theological and biblical knowledge and could treat Sunday morning Adult Education as a town meeting. **The cultural assumptions behind the forum style no longer exist.** Although the style persists in congregations, theological educators now agree that this "town meeting" format is the church's **least** effective adult formation style.

Continuing classes last from two weeks (capsule two- to four week courses around particular themes provide great flexibility) to a year (longer courses give greater depth) and provide more time to explore a topic and develop community than do Adult Forums. Medium- to large sized congregations can run several classes simultaneously—or several during a week.

Special events typically include retreats or workshop around a single subject that

run a half-day to two days in length. They may be held at the church or at a local retreat center.

Special series may be multi-evening or multi-week events focused around a particular theological theme or time of the church year.

Small groups are one of the most successful forms of Christian spiritual formation. They take a myriad of forms: content (a Bible or book study), practices (prayer, hospitality, parenting), outreach (those who work in a homeless shelter or who go on a mission trip), special interests for support (mothers with young children or cancer survivors), or the times and days that they meet. They may be:

- formal or informal,
- congregationally sponsored or hosted,
- meet at the church or in homes, or
- have trained leaders or organic leadership.

Clergy and education directors often (and wrongly) assume that small groups need to be formalized through the congregation. It is good to keep track of the small groups influencing your congregation, but the very dynamism and lack of centralized structure provides much vitality for such groups. The most successful strategy for small group formation may be that formal church leaders provide **resources**, **support**, and some **training** for groups and their leaders—enabling the grassroots processes that lay people organize themselves.

Book or film studies are popular ways of introducing congregations to theological ideas and teaching biblical reflection on culture. Often called "Novel Theology," or "Popcorn Theology," some churches have book or film groups that meet monthly. Others pick a congregational book that may last several months. If you choose to read a book together as a congregation, that book becomes the basis for a common congregational conversation across services (if you have a multi-service congregation), across meetings (the board and the Sunday school teachers are reading the same thing), across generations, and across the clergy-lay divide.

Guest speakers are a powerful way to introduce new ideas, handle controversial issues, or move a congregation ahead on particular practices. Guests may be used in any of the above formats (my congregation experimented with a "Winter Book and Author Series" during Epiphany one year).

Round Table Discussions provide opportunities for congregants to share from their own insights and experience—and often serve as part of a vision process or conflict resolution. Every Lent, my parish omits the formal sermon at the 9:00 a.m. service. Instead, we conduct the Eucharist and then cross the courtyard for "Dialogue Sermons" in which parishioners sit around tables with the morning's texts and create a communal sermon.

Online formation is being used with increasing success in Web-savvy congregations—especially ones with large numbers of GenXers and Millennials. Small groups and classes may be conducted in cyber-space. Such learning experiences may be more powerful than traditional ones in some instances. In addition to online small groups and courses, congregational chat rooms, e-mail prayer lists, and daily Bible studies can provide opportunities for formation when congregants are at work or on the road. A good Web site, full of spiritual formation links and resources, connects shut-ins, busy working families, stay-at-home parents, teens, and college

students in a community beyond the walls of your building.

Adult formation should have a dedicated online corner in your congregation's Web site that includes clear information about programs, spiritual reflections, resources, links to retreat centers, and a book nook. Many congregations still think of the Web as an elaborate advertisement. It is more than that—the Web is your key to reaching all those who cannot come to church on a weekly basis. The better you connect in cyberspace, the more possibility you have to create a learning community.

Questions to consider:

- Does your congregation have a style preference—forums, small groups, workshops, online?
- What style is most challenging for them?
- Why the preference?
- Why the challenge?
- What motivates their choice of style?
- What styles would help forward the church's overall mission?
- What styles work best for evangelism or incorporating newcomers?

Communicating the Template

Do not assume, "if we build it, they will come." Adult Formation is not a field of dreams. After you work out the structures and times for formation, post them and teach them to the congregation. Most adult educators know that they must advertise content, but few think of advertising the structures that carry content. Create a culture of expectation for Sunday morning adult education, your Thursday night classes, or weekly Web offerings. Make it clear in **print**, to the **board**, and **online** exactly **when**, **where**, and **how** people can expect to find resources, community, and events that will help shape their spiritual journeys. Publicize your overall program without specifics, so people can anticipate the spiritual formation offerings and plan accordingly.

Questions to consider:

- How can you communicate the structures of Adult Formation in your congregation?
- Would it help to have established routines and communal expectations for education and formation?
- How might it help?

Second Component: Process/Practice

Congregations are often stuck offering programs that reflect past patterns of learning—typically such patterns resemble a college religion elective, a classroom with the minister as professor and the congregants as students.

Part of your task is helping a congregation switch from an optional program/ spiritual expertise model to understanding adult formation as a **life-long learning process** that includes developing a new **language**, new **community**, intentional **mission** and **vision**, open **communication**, flexible **goals**, **supporting leadership**, and

welcoming conflict. Essentially, Adult Formation provides support for a way of life initiated by baptism or conversion.



New Language

Part of learning a new culture is learning a new language. Many congregations are stuck in older forms of adult education (or no adult education) because they do not have the words to communicate what is needed **now** to help adults grow spiritually and theologically.

A few years ago, I edited a theological document on ministry for the Episcopal Church. When I received an early draft, I noticed that all the references for "clergy" read "leaders" or "leadership" and all the references to "laity" read "service" or "servanthood." The writers had depended on old language while attempting to communicate a new culture of mutual or shared ministry. Without realizing it, they undermined their own theological message. As editor, I did something simple and revolutionary: I used the "universal search and replace" function on my Mac—"leader" was replaced by "**servant**" and "leadership" with "**servanthood**." With a stroke of the keyboard, language matched intent and the entire tone changed.

It is not so easy to change language in a congregation, but it is equally as important. If the congregation thinks of Adult Formation as "Adult Sunday School," they may think attending is for "children," and that you are offering remedial Bible training. If, however, you offer "**Spiritual Formation**" or "**Journey in Faith**" classes, you are honoring the life experience of congregants. If you are a "Program Director," people will think of adult education as a program—an optional thing to attend if one is interested in the offering (like a concert program—you don't buy tickets if you don't want to go). And, sadly, as Program Director, you are the boss—the person who manages the program and receives accolades or criticism. But if you are "**Coordinator of Adult Spiritual Formation**," it is immediately obvious that you serve a dynamic process, something that cannot really be directed or programmed. The emphasis has switched from management to ministry.

Think about the ways your congregation uses language to describe adult formation—and the ways it can be changed. In my congregation, I use the word, "**Gathering**," for the old Adult Forum—a change that indicates mutuality and community instead of argument and expertise. I also insist that the clergy team use the word, "**process**," instead of "program." Personally, I also resist terms like "lay ministry" and opt instead for "**shared ministry**."

Such changes are often slow and incremental, but they are among your most

powerful tools for congregational transformation. Eventually, language creates different realities.

Questions to consider:

- How does your congregation describe Adult Formation?
- How do those terms establish expectations for what you do and what is offered?
- Ideally, how would you describe what you do—or want to do?

New Community

The New Testament insists that we are a new community—one based on gifts, equality, and shared responsibility for God's mission to the world. But too often, we import secular patterns of leadership and management into the church. Some secular expertise is helpful in church administration and overall leadership development. At its heart, however, congregations are **communities of transformation**—places where people come to encounter God and know God more deeply.

The congregational educator is responsible for communicating a vision of this reality and helping people live into it. If adult education is NOT a program to attend, what is it? It is a process by which people grow in faith, learn to mentor others in faith, and practice Christianity in the world. You are not creating an audience for theology, Bible study, or spirituality. You are providing an environment in which the basics of Christian life and growth can happen. For serious congregants, adult education is not optional. **Adult formation is the gathering and strengthening place for learning to be a Christian, for mentoring others in faith, and for practicing faith corporately.** It is the heartbeat of churchgoing in the twenty-first century.

The community that understands adult formation in this way has made giant strides toward understanding Christian community. In settings of exploration, we learn to learn—pursuing, no matter our age or spiritual maturity, the deeper life of faith in God. Anyone who seriously engages this task knows that **spirituality is life-long learning**, a quest that drives the entirety of life.

And anyone who has spent time learning also knows that **excellence in learning comes through teaching**. One never really learns something until one teaches it. Being a learner means being a mentor, one who teaches and shapes the lives of those coming along the path. Sometimes this means:

- formal teaching,
- convening a small group,
- mentoring a friend, spouse, or children, or
- helping a young clergy person become skilled at his or her calling.

Mentoring takes numerous forms. And a learning congregation is called into the task of mentoring itself (and often its neighbors).

Learning and mentoring lead to practice. Without putting faith into practice, learning and teaching are empty acts. As the book of James reminds us, "Faith without works is dead." **Learning, mentoring, and practicing form a circle of spiritual growth**—one leading seamlessly to the other. The congregation who moves around that circle has created a **new kind of community**. No longer

hierarchically or clerically based, the church becomes a community of learners, mentors, and practitioners—clergy and the baptized linked through spiritual friendship, common purpose, and Christian vocation. Gifts, training, expertise, and authority flow around the new communal vision and are no longer programs to protect or budget priorities to guard. Without a new community to support process, any process of adult formation will, ultimately, become just one more competitive program area. You are shaping human lives, not building a program.

Questions to consider:

- How does your congregation understand itself as "community"?
- What role does Adult Formation play in that self-understanding?
- How is the congregation organized?
- What would your congregation think of the words, "learners, mentors, and practitioners"?

Mission/Vision

Mission and vision are also processes (not iron-clad programs) and practices of the Christian life. A mission statement is a living document. And for a church, a mission statement is a **locally interpreted understanding of God's mission to reconcile the world to God's own self**. Because congregational mission expresses God's mission, it must be responsive to the Holy Spirit and to changes in the world around it. Mission statements need to be revised, reworked, reinterpreted, and rewritten as circumstances change.

Adult formation may be the leading edge of such change—because adult formation is often the most responsive area of congregational need. People's felt spiritual needs are a great resource to understand the problems and shifts in the larger culture. And, if you can respond to them quickly and with theological depth, you are drawing the whole congregation closer to God's mission. But mission is more than statements; **good Adult Formation teaches God's mission and practices it by making it tangible in community**. Formed congregants and formed leaders take risks because of God's mission.

Vision and mission are related. Knowing God's mission—universal reconciliation—begs the next question: How do we fit? Where are we in relation to God's work? Where would we like to be? Mission is the reality. Vision is imagining us in that mission. Adult formation is more than teaching the Great Commission; it is imagining a world in which God's Reign is a reality. It is imagining a way of life and spiritual practices that provide the adventure of faith. **Vision is the creative work of theological imagination that draws us forward in God's unfolding drama and that transforms us**. Christian visioning, the development of faithful imagination, takes place **no where else** in our society other than in congregations. As an adult educator, your job is to fuel the imagination of your congregation and teach the practice of vision.

Questions to consider:

- How does your congregation understand itself as "community"?
- Does your church have a mission statement?
- Does it accurately reflect the life of the congregation?

- How might you teach and model theological creativity and imagination in your congregation?
- How do you practice theological imagination in relation to your calling as an educator?

Communication

Spreading the word necessarily involves good communication. Yet few congregations think of communication as ministry, much less a practice of faith! Adult formation, however, depends upon words: the words of the Word, word-of-mouth, words with the power to create community, information, and response. In your capacity as educator, you will find yourself talking for a living. Too often congregational leaders have conceived of communication as a one-way street from those who have information to those who don't. According to this model, the clergy or lay leaders "communicate" with the congregation in a Sunday bulletin or church newsletter.

In a learning congregation, communication is more of a **conversation**: there is an assumption that everyone has something to share and that the common wisdom of a congregation is as worthwhile as the expertise of its trained leadership. Everybody talks and everybody is expected to listen. Communication becomes a process whereby relationships are created.

Conversations take **skill** and **practice**. Christian formation calls congregants to be **faithful conversationalists**—those who develop into an art their ability to talk about God, faith, and their spiritual journeys.

This is not easy. Communication can sometimes seem like babble. And it can be difficult to adjudicate good theology and spiritual growth from bad. As a congregation practices and models conversation-as-communication, however, everyone learns to listen better and gains confidence in their skills.

Talk takes place both inside and outside the congregation. Conversations need to occur **internally**:

- between the clergy and staff,
- between the staff and the board,
- between clergy and clergy; and
- between staff and congregation.

Conversations also need to take place **externally**:

- between congregation and community,
- between clergy from different congregations,
- between members and newcomers, and
- between congregants and the unchurched.

Much Christian formation happens around conversation—both information shared and the ways in which information is shared. The processes and practices developed around creative communications will be one of your greatest assets in growing congregational spirituality.

Questions to consider:

- Who controls information in your church?

- Does "talk" currently serve (as in conversation) or undermine (as in gossip) the mission of the congregation?
- In what ways could information better move around the parish to make Adult Formation more effective?

Goals/Pilgrimage

Even in a process-mode, goals are helpful ways of measuring progress. In addition to setting personal goals, I established goals for the **year**, goals for **each season of adult formation**, and goals for **each course or event**. These goals were posted on flyers and bulletins. Clearly stated goals give you a way to evaluate offerings and provide congregants with a sense of direction and expectation. Setting goals is a good practice to help you develop organizational skills, planning abilities, and institutional trustworthiness.

However many goals you set, or how clearly they are established, a leader who understands process knows that goals can and do change. Over time, I have come to understand goals as **markers on a pilgrimage**. In the case of adult formation, you establish goals to help your congregation move along on their corporate spiritual journey. Anything may change or disrupt that pilgrimage.

For example, in early autumn 2001, many churches were beginning a new program year when the terrible events of September 11 occurred. I had lined up four guests for the first four weeks of adult education. Everyone cancelled and the church was left with no structured program. What I expected and what happened were two entirely different things. Instead, from week-to-week for the next two months, the clergy and I read the congregation's spiritual needs and could plan only a few days ahead. Our goal switched from "developing a congregation of spiritual practices" to "surviving the grief of a terrorist attack." We all learned that goals are **signposts** on our pilgrimage. And sometimes that pilgrimage **changes**—unexpectedly and radically. Eventually, we picked up the earlier goal—about practicing faith—and reworked it in light of the changes we faced.

Questions to consider:

- What are your goals for Adult Formation for the next half year?
- What is your attitude toward goal-setting?
- How do you view the relationship between planning and spirituality?
- What impact does your attitude have on Adult Formation for your congregation?

Support

The best teachers in a congregation are often spiritually hungry. Sunday school teachers and adult Bible study leaders do not attend adult formation—they are busy elsewhere teaching others. The director of adult education needs to tend his or her flock and **feed those who are feeding others**.

This may happen by providing **special events for teachers**—workshops, retreats, continuing education, and even sabbaticals from lay ministry—to help them grow in faith and re-vision their vocation as congregational mentors and educators.

Resources geared for clergy health and spiritual growth **may be adapted** for all

those in important leadership positions. If you are developing a learning congregation, everyone in leadership needs the kind of support generally thought of only for the clergy. Supporting those on the front lines of teaching and learning is key to congregational health and maturity—and provides the nuts-and-bolts of bona fide shared ministry.

Questions to consider:

- What support do you have for your ministry?
- What support do you give to other teachers, mentors, and leaders in your congregation?
- What mechanisms and programs exist to train teachers and empower their spiritual lives?



Welcoming Conflict

If you make only one or two of the changes that transform your congregation's culture of adult formation, you can expect to find yourself embroiled in conflict. **There is nothing more typical than a congregation that hires a new adult formation director asking that person to help it grow and then resists—at every turn—attempts to make it happen.** Expect conflict. Expect resistance. Know that when it happens, things are changing. Whatever you do, do not fall into the trap of making everybody happy with adult education. A "happy" congregation is not a spiritually growing one.

As a parishioner cum-staff-member myself, I know that leaders may cause unnecessary conflict through making poor decisions or not living out of sound Christian practices. When there is tension, the first thing I do is to take a **spiritual self-inventory**:

- Is there anything I have done that is stupid, inappropriate, or un-Christian to cause this?
- Do I need to apologize to anyone? Make amends? Start all over again?
- Is this of my own making? My fault?

Pray, study, and seek wise counsel on your leadership practices.

Even if you deem the situation to be "my fault," recognize that God can still use it. Perhaps it was over-zealousness or enthusiasm for an idea or for justice that carried

you into the conflict. You may well be "right," but have failed to communicate that appropriately. Appreciate what gifts or passions created this situation—and how God might use it to teach you better leadership skills and spiritual maturity.

But honest self-assessment does not let your congregation off the hook. In times of congregational change, as much as twenty percent of a congregation might be overtly resisting transformation and undermining new ways of doing things. The more virulent the resistance, the more profound the change-in-the-making.

Don't get frightened and stop. Keep moving. Continue to develop leaders who understand what is happening across the congregation. Remember that conflict is part of a process of growth. Avail yourself of resources on managing conflict (such as those in the "Conflict" section of the Congregational Resource Guide). As a congregational educator, use the opportunity to teach about conflict and change, and encourage theological engagement with ideals of mission, vision, and Christian community.

Conflict, when handled creatively, can create genuine teaching moments for many in the congregation. Or, alternatively, it may be a signal that the congregation >will not change—and perhaps God would better use your gifts and vision elsewhere. Conflict not only teaches, but also provides a unique situation for **discernment** for individuals and congregations.

Questions to consider:

- Do you do regular leadership self-assessment in prayer or with colleagues?
- How do you handle conflict and criticism? Do you have skills to deal with church conflict?

Third Component: Content



Good content generates interest and enthusiasm that attracts members and newcomers to events and classes. Even deeper, however, good content is the seedbed for **growing faith**.

Adult educators need to traverse some difficult territory when choosing speakers, curriculum, and resources for faith formation—including carefully **balancing** the congregation's concerns and one's own commitments, **linking** content and style,

creating theological **direction**, **developing** levels of depth and **maturity** across the template, and **using** congregational **resources**.

Congregation/Content

The content of adult education includes curricula (either purchased or self-produced), guest speakers, books, video, and Web resources. What will people read or watch? Who will direct them spiritually?

Choosing material can be very difficult—especially in diverse or conflicted congregations. Part of your job is to navigate between two tensions:

1. Do you **accommodate** or **challenge** the congregation's views on God, the Bible, holiness, ethics, and spirituality? Is your job to **comfort** or **discomfort** them?
2. Do you follow what **they** think they need or what **you and the clergy** think is needed?

These are not either-or choices, but represent the poles around which you must make some decisions.

At the parish where I served, for example, I typically **accommodated** the congregation when it came to **style** (as a Washington, DC area congregation, my parish had great respect for well-educated experts; I invited many highly qualified guest professors to lead classes), but I always **challenged** them in terms of theological **content** or Christian **practice**. I tried to both comfort and disturb the congregation at the same time. Although I listened for what the congregation wanted theologically, I made the decision to usually follow clergy and leadership preference when choosing content. I chose Bible study materials or theological works that supported the ministry of the Word as presented in the pulpit.

I always picked materials that pushed people to **new understandings** of the Bible and theology—or toward embracing **new practices** of faith. But it all came wrapped in a navy blue Washington suit.

These are self-conscious choices based on issues of **congregational development** and the **theological vision** of the clergy staff—choices encouraged by a colleague at another congregation. As we discussed the role of adult formation, my friend, Scott, said, "You know, Diana, in privileged churches like ours, our job is NOT to provide spiritual enrichment, to create more privilege. Rather, our job is to challenge and provoke so that the Holy Spirit may transform us."

Scott stated it so clearly: **enrichment** or **transformation**? Some parishes, particularly those in minority, disadvantaged, or struggling communities, need enrichment. Mine, however, was already rich. It needed God's transforming power. So, I opted to discomfort them with content that the leadership thought necessary for change. Adult Formation was lively and controversial—and always risky—but it also forwarded the overall mission and vision of the parish. Certainly, it is possible—and sometimes desirable—to make less unsettling choices.

Questions to consider:

- Does your congregation need enrichment or transformation? A combination of both?
- Would you describe your congregation as spiritually privileged or disadvantaged?
- Do they need comfort or discomfort in order to better see, know, and serve God?
- How does your theological vision and spiritual commitment (and that of the clergy staff) resonate—or differ—with that of the congregation?
- What curriculum or resources best serves your situation?

Content/Template

Once you decide what you want to present, you need to decide **how** to present it. Some ideas are best discussed in a large class format on Sunday morning; others are better dealt with in small groups and in private homes; still others deserve the extended reflection of a workshop or retreat. **Match the content to the time parameters and pick a style that mirrors the content.**

You might also present the **same idea in several venues**. For example, during Lent 2002, my congregation studied Christian practices. We approached the subject in different ways:

1. a guest speaker presented a single practice at a large Sunday morning Adult Gathering;
2. we sold the book, *Practicing Our Faith*, at the book table;
3. we directed parishioners to www.practicingourfaith.org for further resources;
4. we offered small group study of the book on Wednesday evenings following dinner and Eucharist; and
5. we hosted a Saturday workshop on the practice of hospitality.

In addition, the clergy began to self-consciously use the language of "**practice**" in conversation, committee meetings, and sermons.

Because of the variety of offerings, parishioners could learn about practices with differing levels of depth and commitment. And we created a congregation-wide conversation about faith practices—which furthered the church's understanding of its own identity and mission.

Work across your template to provide a number of opportunities for spiritual formation. Recognize that Sunday morning is (probably) the least effective education time. It will usually serve to introduce an idea or issue—but can create enough interest to draw some people deeper into faith. Sound content presented at alternative times (midweek, weekends, or retreats) allows for deeper reflection and commitment.

Questions to consider:

- How can you coordinate a congregation-wide conversation around theology or spirituality?

- How can you create a "seamless garment" of adult formation throughout the parish?

Themes/Seasons

To provide theological clarity, it is helpful to match Adult Formation with the Christian year, or with the preaching concerns of the clergy staff. Each season, therefore is assigned an **overall theme**—taking its cues from the larger traditions of Christian liturgy.

A full Advent schedule might, for example, have the theme, "**Waiting**." Offerings could include:

- a Sunday morning Bible study of Advent lectionary texts;
- a Saturday workshop on Centering Prayer or Walking the Labyrinth;
- a Wednesday small group study on the practice of discernment or the practice of saying yes and saying no; and
- a book offering of Wendy Wright's *The Vigil*.

Imagine how many different ways to communicate the theological and spiritual dimensions of "waiting" across the congregation. At Christmas, incorporate the sense of expectation built from "waiting" into the liturgy or other holiday celebrations—and don't forget to include the Children's Ministry Coordinator in the theme. He or she can help you turn "waiting" into a family practice for Advent (the parents will thank you!). By plugging a theme and content into the already established template, Advent becomes a wholistic experience for Christian exploration and growth.

Questions to consider:

- Does your Adult Formation schedule make liturgical sense?
- Does it teach about the Christian year or the liturgy in its offerings?

Communicate Content

Everything published about Adult Formation should also communicate theological or biblical content. Every announcement, Sunday bulletin, newsletter, flyer, or Web posting can do two things for you:

1. supply **information** about Adult Formation activities, and
2. teach **faith** or **practice**.

Use congregational resources for both functions—every communication platform is a **potential classroom**. Flyers, for example, should not only give rooms, times, and dates. They should also supply the "why" and the "what" of theological questions to be addressed.

Questions to consider:

- Does your publicity give theological or spiritual reasons and/or grounding for events?

- Do you plainly state what will be explored, studied, or learned through joining a group or activity?
- Do you give some reasons why this subject is important?



Fourth Component: Community

Community doesn't just happen. Nor does spiritual formation occur in every gathering in a church.

For the congregation to be a place of formation and Christian practice, leaders need to be intentional about **space**, practices of **hospitality**, **relationships**, **reading**, **virtual** spirituality, formation **across** the congregation, and the **relationship** between the church and larger networks of spiritual practice.



Setting the Table

The first time I attended a formation event at the parish where I served, I was shocked by the way the room was arranged. Approximately 100 chairs formed neat rows, all facing front toward a podium and a blank white wall. From my experience as a college professor, I knew that this room was the worst set-up for a learning environment.

The very first change I made was to throw away the rows of chairs. Not literally, of course. I asked the sextons to set up **round tables** with chairs. On each table, we

placed a **pitcher of water** (coffee remained on the side table), **name tags and markers, writing paper**, and any **books** (usually Bibles or Prayer Books) or **handouts** relevant to the class. After that, we added **baskets of goodies** (often chosen to match the topic—the baskets were full of apples for a discussion on Adam and Eve) or loaves of **freshly baked bread** with butter and jam. When congregants entered the education rooms, there was **music** playing—Taize, medieval chant, or hymns—to signal that formation is still an act of worship. In the congregation, people came to expect surprises from Adult Formation—and to feel cared for in the process of learning.

Occasionally, space constraints forced us to set up rows. In that case, handouts were placed on each chair. And we formed "buddy groups" of three or four people for discussion. In every event, **everyone talked to someone else**—no one was left behind.

Part of your job is to set the table for adult formation. As the minister sets the table for bread and wine, you are setting the table for the sacrament of the word.

Questions to consider:

- What do your education rooms look like?
- What do they communicate about Adult Formation and spirituality?
- How might they better create community?
- How does your job change when you think of yourself as "setting the table for the sacrament of the word"?

Hospitality

Adult Formation often serves as the gateway for visitors and newcomers to your congregation. New people will come to the worship service. If they have a good experience there, the next step usually will be to attend a formation event. Good practices of welcoming strangers to Adult Formation are key for evangelism and incorporation of new members.

To be hospitable, you must be sure that people must know how to get where for what. **Signs, maps, ushers, greeters, guides**, and **clearly marked nurseries** are basic common sense and practices of a welcoming congregation.

Although I don't always like it myself, in large congregations, **nametags** are necessary—for both long-term folks and newcomers. Seating people around tables and in buddy groups insures that someone will talk to your newcomers. Always provide **coffee**, cold **drinks**, and **food** at every event. As most churchgoers know, food is basic to providing hospitality. Calling someone by name, creating opportunity for conversation, and feeding people are simple, welcoming practices.

Make sure that the whole congregation knows what formation events and activities are open to **everyone** (Sunday morning classes), are arranged for **specific groups** (a workshop for parents of teens), or are **closed fellowship** (a confidential support group). Also, make clear whether **sign-ups** are necessary, if a **fee** is charged, or **what might be needed** for the event (bring your Bible or come dressed in casual clothes). There is nothing more awkward than showing up at the wrong place, uninvited, and with the wrong stuff. Poor communication about such things makes

for inhospitable congregations.

Finally, remember to provide hospitality for your guest speakers or workshop leaders. Speakers should be given **clear directions** about arrival time, parking, and where they will be speaking. Also, call them about two weeks in advance asking if they have any final questions about their assignment or preparation (or final instructions for the set-up, xeroxing, etc.) If possible, assign them a **congregational "shepherd"** to greet them and help them around the building and with any needs they might have. Take them out to lunch or dinner as appropriate; give them quiet time as appropriate. Make sure they have enough time to speak or do their presentation. If possible, have the **honorarium** check in hand—or let the speaker know when the check will be mailed. Write thank you notes.

Questions to consider:

- In what ways do you welcome strangers into Adult Formation?
- What are your strengths in hospitality? Your weaknesses?
- Walk around your church—are rooms clearly marked?
- Do signs lead people to Adult Formation rooms?
- Can people get easily from the children's Sunday school or the nursery to Adult Formation?

Existing Relationships

From the New Testament example of Jesus and his disciples onward, Christians have been keenly aware that the best teaching and spiritual formation happens through **personal relationships**. Throughout your congregation, these relationships already exist—networks of friends, parents and children, spouses, and informal mentoring relationships (a teenage babysitter with a favorite four-year old). Part of your work is to help people see their already existing communities (they might not be entirely aware of the relational web spread across the congregation) as small groups—as mini communities of spiritual formation.

Try to identify some of the primary networks in your congregation. Perhaps many people work in the same company. Perhaps a majority has children in the same school. Help link together those who are closely related (maybe some work in the same downtown office building) for support or study. Follow the **natural networks**—and encourage people to be more overt about **praying** for each other, **sharing** needs and concerns, **studying** together, or **doing outreach** together. If you can endue relationships with intentional spiritual practice, you have gone a long way to creating a vital congregation of the priesthood of all believers.

Questions to consider:

- What relationships have been most influential in shaping your spiritual life?
- How did those relationships develop?
- How were you changed or strengthened through the relationship?
- Do you understand your current relationships as communities for spiritual formation?

Groups

Not only can all relationships serve as learning communities for spiritual formation, but **all church groups should focus on hearing, knowing, and practicing faith.** From Sunday school teachers to budget committees, cursory prayer will not do. Do not simply bless business-as-usual. Put before the congregation a vision of **every group as a small group.**

For example, Outreach committees should not just give away money, but they should study the Bible together, explore practices of welcoming strangers, pray together, support one another in ministry, and tackle difficult local and national issues with theological insight.

In a learning community, vestries and boards of elders become discernment groups and mini-seminaries—teaching leadership skills and deepening their members' grasp of the Bible and theology. (See *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*). In one congregation of which I was a part, the vestry did no business for an entire year. Instead, they devoted themselves to prayer and study in order to discern the Spirit's direction for the congregation (and these were liberal Episcopalians!). Their dedication to spiritual growth and theological direction sparked a turn-around in their declining congregation. From the community they developed and the insights gained, they led the church to quadruple its membership and budget in less than a decade.

Any time any group gathers, their **primary purpose should be the spiritual formation of its members and their ability to discern God's work in the world.** Their secondary purpose is their function—not the other way around.

Questions to consider:

- What groups in your church function as learning communities for spiritual formation?
- Which ones do not?
- How do these various understandings effect the mission and ministry of the congregation?

Holy Reading

Although it may seem old-fashioned at the moment, communities organize around the power and experience of words. Christian community has always been highly dependent on the written word. We are people of the Book. And we are people of many books.

As society moves more and more toward other ways of learning and communicating, it is a valuable practice for us to retain some affection for our books—and to honor the communal wonder of meeting God through the written word. At this cultural juncture, Adult Formation can play a key role in keeping and teaching holy reading as a practice of faith. Books form community by creating conversations, clarifying difficult issues, providing practical resources, or communicating universal spiritual experiences. **Book groups, special book studies, book tables,** clergy recommended **book lists, book nooks** on your Web site, **lectio divina** workshops, **author events,** and **reading aloud** to each other (as do many monks and nuns at

meals) are powerful ways of creating community around books.

Questions to consider:

- How has your faith been shaped by books? Which books?
- How can you pass on the love of reading and books as a spiritual practice—especially to younger, visually oriented people?
- How does your faith tradition honor reading and books?



Virtual Formation

As a book person, I have been slow to make the leap into cyberspace. But I do recognize that many of my friends and most of my students are not as timid. Some people I know spend literally hours online—for both business and pleasure.

Online formation is being used with increasing success in Web-savvy congregations—especially ones with large numbers of GenXers and Millennials. Small groups and classes may be conducted in cyberspace. Such support groups and learning experiences may be more powerful than traditional ones in some instances. A friend of mine even serves as a spiritual director online to her geographically removed directees.

In addition to **online small groups and courses, congregational chat rooms, e-mail prayer lists, and daily Bible studies** can provide opportunities for formation when congregants are at work or on the road. A good website, full of spiritual formation links and resources, including streaming sermons and adult formation events (audio and video) connects shut-ins, busy working families, stay-at-home moms, teens, and college students in a community beyond the walls of your building. Adult formation should have a **dedicated online corner** in your congregation's website that includes clear information about programs, spiritual reflections written by clergy and lay persons, resources, links to retreat centers, and a book nook. Many congregations still think of the Web as an elaborate advertisement. It is more than that—the Web is your key to reaching all those who cannot come to church on a weekly basis. The better you connect in cyberspace, the more possibility you have to create a learning community.

Questions to consider:

- What barriers exist in your congregation to doing formation in cyberspace?
- How might they be overcome?
- How might your spiritual life be enriched or transformed by community provided over the internet?
- What resources might better equip you—and your congregation—to do God's work?

Networks

Congregational spiritual formation does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, myriad networks crisscross church life. Many a congregational leader has bemoaned this fact—as spiritual fads often undermine the hard work of theological formation that takes place over years in the local church.

Wise leaders might see the shortcomings of such movements, but they are equally as quick to capitalize on the **flexibility** and **creativity** of popular religious impulses. While Alpha or the Good News movement—or Integrity or the Campaign for a Living Wage—may cause tension in a congregation, such movements also present exciting and challenging possibilities for congregational education.

In the Episcopal Church, one of our spiritual gurus is the always-controversial Bishop Jack Spong. Nearly every priest I know frets at the impending publication of a new Spong book—as they field threatening phone calls from disgruntled parishioners. One such priest, a friend named David, served a middle-of-the theological road congregation, and anticipated their response. Instead of ignoring the controversial book, he offered a class on it in conjunction with its publication. This served a dual purpose: 1) people had to really **read** the book—and not just react to the publicity about the book—and understand the Bishop's arguments and 2) it gave both pro- and con-Spongites a **safe place** to hear each other's perspectives. It was one of the best multi-week series I've ever seen in a church—a genuine exercise in creating a learning community.

Some networks and popular spiritual tools provide opportunities that did not previously exist in congregational life. Movements around Centering Prayer, the Labyrinth, Celtic spirituality, medieval mysticism, spiritual direction, or interest in the Benedictine rule tend to draw together diverse congregational factions in prayer and spiritual life. While people might argue about Bishop Spong or Tim LaHaye, they find themselves all reading Henry Nouwen. Encourage healthy exploration of spiritual practices across a range of traditions and theologies. Engage networks, fads, and gurus **directly**. In some cases, they can really help.

Questions to consider:

- What popular religious impulses are present in your congregation?
- What books are your congregants reading?
- Whose lectures do they attend?
- What does their seeking say about what you are offering in Adult Formation? About your church's ability to form community?
- Is there another way to address some of their concerns?

A Personal Perspective

I do not have a degree in Christian Education; I am not ordained; I never worked in a church before my position at Christ Church. I have a doctorate in religious studies, have been (I hope) a faithful Episcopalian for 22 years, and have mostly worked in academia (college—not seminary—teaching) and in the media. I became the Director of Faith Formation at Christ Church because the rector, an acquaintance, asked me to help him out. Put simply, I decided to do a friend a favor.

At the beginning—and I even said this to him—I thought it would be easy. Organize some Sunday morning programs, teach some Bible studies, and offer a couple of classes myself. After all, I'd been a college professor for a dozen years. I knew how to teach theology and the Bible.

Very quickly, I realized that being the adult educator in a big, complex parish like Christ Church was one of the most challenging things I'd ever agreed to do. My work involved teaching, yes. But I was also an administrator (with a budget and a secretary), program planner, hospitality and event coordinator, sexton, graphic arts designer, educational theory expert, theologian-in-residence, congregational development consultant, spiritual director, preacher, sister-confessor to the clergy, and conflict resolution specialist. I never dreamed that one simple thing—coordinating adult formation—could draw off so much of my creativity or make me think so intentionally about spiritual formation.

Nor did I guess that I'd just signed up for a self-directed hands-on seminary-level education in pastoral and practical theology! In my first year, I read everything I could about congregations—how they learn and how they change—and I'm still reading today. And attending workshops. And asking lots of questions. And I'm more dependent on God, the Spirit, my prayer life, retreats, discernment, and theological study than ever before. It is true—there are no atheists in foxholes (especially church foxholes). My spiritual life is richer, deeper, and more committed because I served these people.

There is one personal challenge I'd like to share. Early on, Bill, a friend who was a rector at another large Episcopal congregation, gave me an important piece of advice: "Diana, whatever you do, you've got to love that congregation. You've got to love them and keep loving them. That's the only thing that matters. Loving those people."

I realized that Bill shared with me deep wisdom—about what it means to be in ministry. And I realized that love is the hardest wisdom to live. Some days, I thought I loved them. Many more days they frustrated me and made me angry. Sometimes I wanted to walk out and tell them what I really thought of them. Once in a while, I saw Jesus in them (I also learned that sometimes, when I didn't see him, I needed new glasses!). And everyday, I struggled with what it meant to love a congregation—especially one I did not really like.

What does it mean to serve, to shape, to mentor, to give, to have compassion, to support, to challenge, and to transform others? Because of my own questions and where I am on my spiritual journey, they have taught me more than I ever imagined I could know about love. And how love happens in community.

This guide tells you what I have learned, the books and resources I found helpful in my own journey of becoming an adult educator. It is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it points you in directions you may want to pursue. And it raises many of the questions I've asked myself about my vocation, about the congregation, and about the how-to's of ministry. The information shared here is a snapshot of a journey in progress—how one serious churchgoer accidentally joined the staff of a church and tried to make a real difference in the lives of others and in the world. It is a process, a pilgrimage. I hope you find it helpful in your calling. And I hope that it creates a learning community of educators who are struggling to find good conversation partners along the way.

